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In the cells of Fortress Europe: an interview with Marianna Economou, director of *The Longest Run*

Marianna Economou's observational documentary *The Longest Run* (2015) tells the story of two teenage refugees, Kurds from Syria and Iraq, who meet in a Greek juvenile prison awaiting trial for people trafficking. The film centres on the friendship of Jasim and Alsaleh, their telephone calls home to parents trapped in a war zone, and their stories of how they were abandoned by traffickers to face lengthy incarceration in Greece. In the aftermath of the so-called refugee crisis of late 2015 and early 2016, when hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan arrived in Greece,¹ local filmmakers were initially slow to respond due to the ongoing economic crisis in the country and consequent dearth of funding opportunities. But Economou (who became interested in making a film about young refugees in Greek custody in 2014) and colleagues worked on the film for free. As Prem Kumar Rajaram has noted, there is a common tendency to perpetuate a Eurocentric perspective on the events of 2015 and 2016, whereby "it is Europe that has had the 'difficult year', not [refugees or] migrants."² *The Longest Run* avoids this by focusing squarely on the experiences of these two young men in a forgotten and under-resourced corner of Fortress Europe's prison system.

The film has been screened on Arte, Al Jazeera, ERT2 (Greece) and UR (Sweden), and has won several awards, including an honorary mention and the trade union prize at the Leipzig documentary film festival. Economou, who has a background in anthropology and photography, has been making documentaries since 1999. Her previous films include *My Place in the Dance*, on ageing and social tensions in a village community, *Twelve Neighbours*, on diversity and coexistence in inner-city Athens, and *Food for Love*, on mothers' culinary relationships with their adult children. She talks about the difficulties she faced making *The Longest Run*, and its reception in Greece.

Thomas Austin

What was your motivation and purpose in making the film? What were you responding to?

Marianna Economou

Well it all started in 2014, at least a year before the big influx of immigration into Greece. Because totally by chance I came cross a book by a teacher in the juvenile prison in Volos, and this book included descriptions of inmates, of minors, refugees who had come from [the Middle East] and had ended up in prison. And I was really struck by the fact that they describe this incredibly dangerous journey through [the Middle East] and how the [people]

¹ "[Lesbos] has a population of about 90,000, yet saw almost 450,000 refugees pass through during 2015." Helen Nianias, "Refugees in Lesbos: are there too many NGOs on the island?" *The Guardian*, 5 January 2016, online. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2016/jan/05/refugees-in-lesbos-are-there-too-many-ngos-on-the-island>. "Frontex, the EU's border control agency, said 30 times as many migrants entered Europe in January and February [2016] as in the same two months of last year, and the UN's refugee agency announced that 131,724 people had crossed the Mediterranean – the vast majority of them reaching Greece – so far in 2016, almost as many as made the journey in the first six months of 2015." Jon Henley, Jennifer Rankin, Helen Smith and Peter Walker, "Refugee crisis: European leaders demand urgent support for Greece", *The Guardian*, 1 March 2016, online. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/01/refugee-crisis-european-leaders-demand-urgent-support-for-greece>

² Prem Kumar Rajaram, "Europe's 'Hungarian solution'," *Radical Philosophy* 197 (May /June 2016), p.2.

smugglers used them and threatened them, and they ended up in prison having these incredibly serious accusations that could end up with 30 years of imprisonment.

So I started researching that and I found out first of all that the juvenile prisons at that time in Greece were overcrowded. Somehow whenever they arrested a refugee they would just dump them into a prison, and then wait for at least 18 months, because this is how the legal system works here, it has terrible delays, and then they would have to face a Greek court, usually with no legal representation and generally without respecting their human rights at all. So all these issues made me really angry, to be honest with you. I said this is a part of the refugee story that hasn't come to the attention of anybody. Everybody was talking about refugees coming to Greece but nobody knew about these minors. So that's how it all started.

Of course it was incredibly difficult because everybody kept telling me, forget it Marianna, you won't get permission to film inside the prison, nobody has ever done it. But I was really determined because I thought it was really unfair. Many kids were just forgotten in prison, their lives were just destroyed.

TA

How hard was it to get permission to film, and also to get some funding behind the project?

ME

The permission took at least half a year. First of all I went to the prison itself and met with the director, and then it's bureaucracy, I needed a permit from the Ministry of Justice. I really pushed as hard as I could and I tried again and again. Eventually they agreed, I think because they realised that this is an issue that is very important and they really have to look into it. And they gave me strictly 15 days of access to the prison. So I had to do everything from scratch in 15 days.

TA

And what about the funding for the project, how did that work?

ME

Well the funding is a very sad story, because we didn't get any funding at all in the end. It was crazy. It was a time when Greece was collapsing. Our national broadcaster ERT had closed down, the film centre didn't have any money at all, we had elections almost every six months so it was very, very unstable. So I couldn't get any funding from Greece. Then I applied for funding abroad, from foreign broadcasters. They all showed a lot of interest but it's typical: 'make the film then we'll consider it'. And in the end, even though it [screened] at the Thessaloniki film festival as work in progress, and it was actually awarded there, and I thought "ah, that's it!", but by that time most of those broadcasters had made their programmes for up to 2017, so they said 'now we are closed, we don't have any space.' So we didn't get anything out of that. And it was a very big decision because once we had got the permit to film at the prison it would have been crazy not to have done it, so I got some friends, some colleagues and I said 'shall we go ahead and at least do the shoot?' So that happened and I got a friend to edit it and eventually, hopefully, we'll get paid. But of course once it was completed and it premiered at Leipzig and was awarded there³ [...], suddenly everybody was interested and then it was Arte, Al Jazeera, ERT, they actually bought it and we could actually pay our expenses. It's very difficult, very difficult, because nobody

³ *The Longest Run* was awarded an honorary mention and the trade union prize at the Leipzig documentary film festival in 2015.

has any money in Greece anyway. We couldn't get any loans from the banks, it was just impossible.

TA

It sounds a very insecure process. Do you think film-making in Greece will be hand to mouth for the foreseeable future, whatever the topic?

ME

Well in the past year things have improved a bit. The government has decided to pump some money into film, the film centre has some money now and ERT is funding new projects, so it's a better situation. And once you get national funding it's much easier to contact international broadcasters.

TA

What about the response to the film?

ME

Incredibly good, incredibly positive. And we have had different audiences. We had the festival audience but then we had a special screening at the French Institute where we invited lots of people from the legal world, we got people from the Ministry of Justice, judges, and the response was very interesting. They were very alerted, they said there were big gaps in the legal system regarding this issue and I heard that a serious discussion has started in the ministry and among the people who make laws. It has had an impact and this has been the biggest reward really.

TA

What about the more right wing, xenophobic end of Greek society? Do you think your film is pushing back against other media representations?

ME

I don't think it has had this kind of direct conversation yet. [But] I'm trying to show this film in as many different venues as possible. Now there has been interest from universities and schools so I'm always positive about that. I really believe if there is going to be any change it's going to come from education and from that generation. It's showing not only in big cities, it's been shown in small communities and islands, I think they are all important.

TA

What about the two men themselves [Jasim and Alsaleh]? How did they agree to be filmed and what's happened to them since the film?

ME

When I got in the prison I told the director I would like to meet boys who were accused of [people] smuggling and he presented me with 10 cases. From the outset I spotted Jasim, the youngest one, the one who is from the north of Iraq, because he seemed to me totally lost and totally innocent. He was really arrested at the border, he didn't even know Greece existed. Alsaleh was always on his side, helping him out, translating, and they shared a cell, and I liked this relationship of friendship between them. Also an important role in my choice was that they were both waiting for the court case so I was interested in following them through to see what happens during and after, and in that way the film would have a development.

TA

That relationship really anchors the film and makes it very involving. What were their thoughts about the film? Were they cautious about letting you film them?

ME

At the beginning they were very cautious because they are cautious generally, they don't trust anybody. And me being Greek, they couldn't understand why I was interested in them, they always felt there was something behind it. But with time it seemed that I was really *genuinely* interested in them and I was on their side. They really felt that. And I would spend long hours in their cell, sitting on their bed and chatting, just asking them things. And I think also the kids have such a need to be heard. Nobody hears them, nobody. The only person who hears them is this teacher [who works at the prison], who actually wants to hear about their story.

TA

Did you spend much time with them before you started shooting? Because you had such a limited schedule, did you have to go in there and start shooting straight away?

ME

Straight away. I didn't have the chance to spend time with them.

TA

The camera is very close to them and they don't seem self-conscious about it all, so it seems like you built a rapport very quickly.

ME

Yes, yes, this is the making of a documentary, getting close to your characters. I think if I wasn't able to do that I would have given up. And at the beginning it was very awkward because the first two days of shooting I had two guards next to me, looking through the camera, seeing exactly what I was shooting, they had made up the cell as if it was a five-star hotel, they had hidden all the bars, they had made some new curtains, it was a disaster! I said, 'oh my God, what am I going to do here?' But I had to build trust with the prison director, that was the most important of all. He had to trust me and to be sure that I would not infringe on things. I made sure that I wasn't interested to uncover all the problems of his prison.

TA

It certainly comes across as very even-handed. The guards aren't evil, they're just doing a very busy job with limited resources, so it comes across as very neutral about that.

ME

Yes, and that is the reality you know. Because many people ask me, 'is it because of the camera that they all seem so friendly?' Probably the director yes, and some of them, but the guards who are actually in the corridors, because they are almost imprisoned themselves, and spend so many hours of their lives being imprisoned and next to the boys, they build a relationship. Some of them [have] a very close, almost paternalistic relationship. It's very moving and it's genuine.

TA

What about the two men now? It's really quite alarming towards the end when Jasim has disappeared and it's not clear what's happened to him. Do you know anything about what has happened since the filming?

ME

Unfortunately Jasim disappeared. It was very strange because I was in very close contact with him when he got out of prison. I was seeing him every day, I was calling him and I was really worried that something bad would happen to him. And suddenly one day his phone was dead. So I really don't know. I want to believe that he managed to get to Germany, to his brother.

Alsaleh spent 6 months in Athens, which was very difficult for him because he didn't have any money. He was staying with some other Kurds in a basement in Athens and eventually he managed to go to Germany. He was in a camp for 6 months there, he was sent to school, he is learning German. And now he actually has a flat of his own, he gets some money from the German state and he's well, he's very well. I talk to him on the phone and he sounds really well.

TA

How possible would it be, how useful would it be, to try and aid people like these two men to make their own films, to self-author their own documentaries?

ME

I think that would be fantastic. I think there are already some workshops taking place in refugee camps and in the NGOs, small films [where] they film each other and they tell their stories. I think it's very, very important.

TA

How do you think your film relates to the terrain of Greek films about immigration? Is your film in conversation with other films? Are you trying to correct some attitudes?

ME

On the one hand I was really interested to bring out this very specific aspect of the refugee issue that was not heard and nobody knew about it, that everything is not so rosy [with] people helping out the refugees who arrive on boats. On the other hand I would say that all films (and there aren't that many in Greece) are trying to bring out the human face of that issue, and I think this is very important. And this is probably what I also tried with my film, especially using the telephone conversations [with the men's respective mothers]. For me this is a key point in the film because that showed there is a universality, that these kids have a mother and father who worry and who care for them and the viewers can relate to that. Everybody can relate to that, and this reminds us that they're not just refugees, they're not just numbers, they're not condemned for some terrible criminal act, they are human beings. And I think this is something we should always remind people. And probably this is the common ground that all these films about refugees are trying to pursue.

